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World Summit on Sustainable Development

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Agenda item 11
Round tables

Discussion paper for the round tables

Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit to the World Summit on Sustainable Development a set of questions prepared by the President of the Summit to guide discussions at the round tables to be held from 2 to 4 September on the theme "Making it happen".

Making it happen
The challenge for the Johannesburg Summit

1. At the Millennium Summit of the United Nations, we have endorsed a series of goals that deal with poverty eradication, education, health and sustainable development. In Agenda 21, the Rio conventions and the outcome of this Summit, we have established a framework for sustainable development. Our challenge is to make it happen — to ensure that these commitments are fulfilled.

2. The Rio vision of integrating development with environment and making both mutually supportive is far from being realized. Over the last decade, progress has been slower than needed to address the twin challenges. As a result, extreme poverty, inequality, hunger and unsustainable consumption and production patterns continue to pose serious challenges to sustainable development. The perils inherent in the prevailing model of development, which is skewed towards the rich, are becoming increasingly evident. Yet current trends have not been curbed. Unless the issues of poverty and inequality are comprehensively addressed, the achievement of sustainable development will remain a mirage. We have to address the root causes.

3. There are apparently five major reasons for such a slow pace of progress.

4. First, there is a lack of resources in developing countries to bear the cost of shifting to the sustainable path to development. There is a shortfall in what is required and what has been generated or secured from other resources to meet the cost. Official development assistance (ODA) has declined rather than increased since 1992, although the recent International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Monterrey, Mexico, in March 2002, holds out prospects for

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reversing this trend. Debt relief has fallen short of what is needed. Market access remains a major issue and a crucial part of the expectation that has emerged from the Doha round of multilateral trade negotiations. A special effort is needed to address these constraints, particularly for the five priority areas — water and sanitation, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity (WEHAB) — identified by the Secretary-General, which are crucial to the realization of the goal of halving poverty by 2015.

5. In a world of unprecedented prosperity and technological advancement, such constraints emanate largely from the lack of resolve to share with and care for the have nots. The struggle against poverty is the shared responsibility of all. A renewed commitment to global solidarity is central to the success of efforts to relieve the plight of the poor.

6. Second, there is the lack of coherence and consistency across a range of policy areas dealing with sustainable development. The existing institutions and policy-making bodies, at both the domestic and the international levels, lack the capacity to integrate the goals of economic growth, social development and environmental protection. Sectoral lines of authority continue to dominate decision-making. Horizontal linkages between line departments/organizations at every level need to be strengthened to enable these institutions to pursue sustainable development in a holistic manner. At the global level, institutions need to ensure broad-based participation and greater transparency in the process of decision-making.

7. Third, there are limits to national action in the area of sustainable development when natural resources and ecosystems are shared across national boundaries. In the economic sphere, globalization requires national action to be in step with what other countries are doing. Hence, without a broad framework for action at the regional and global levels, countries have little incentive to pursue sustainable development on their own. Whether it is a question of managing shared resources or combating water-related diseases or reclaiming degraded land, coordinated actions across borders will be required to achieve the desired ends.

8. Fourth, efforts to shift to the path of sustainable development are often derailed by methodological debates and scientific disputes. The perils of unsustainability are downplayed. Despite the global consensus on sustainable development, sceptics still question the need to shift to the path of sustainability. Such debates have weakened the resolve to take action. At the same time, the scientific effort required to learn more has not received the priority it needs. More effort is also required to direct agricultural and industrial research towards technologies that promote sustainable development and to ensure affordable access to these technologies for developing countries.

9. Fifth, the very nature of sustainable development is such that all segments of society without exception should be allowed to participate in the everyday decision-making that has a direct impact on their lives. Similarly, they have to be part of implementation endeavours. Much more needs to be done to promote the democratization of decision-making and broad-based participation in implementation.

10. Without significant progress in addressing these issues, there is a serious risk that the Johannesburg Summit commitments on sustainable development will not be fulfilled. The real challenge is to translate these commitments into tangible actions.

The participants of the round tables are requested to address the following questions and provide answers that will really make it happen:

(a) How to mobilize resources, at both the global and the domestic levels, to support the millennium development goals and the priority areas identified in this Summit?

(b) How to improve coherence and consistency in national and international institutions as well as their capacity to integrate the three components of sustainable development? How to promote broad-based participation in international institutions and make them more responsive to the needs of developing countries?

(c) How to promote regional and global cooperation in the five priority areas of water and sanitation, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity?

(d) How to bring scientific knowledge to bear on decision-making and to deploy the necessary resources for research and development in the areas related to sustainable development? How to ensure affordable access to critical technologies for sustainable development for poor people and developing countries?

(e) How can this Summit lead to a renewed and stronger commitment to global solidarity?